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Articles in Today's Clips Thursday, February 21, 2008

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Poverty forum draws testimony from dozens

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Wednesday, February 20, 2008

By Holly Klaft

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FLINT - Edward Burns said most of the people he meets wouldn't guess he's been homeless for the past 18 months.

His clothes are clean and pressed. His hair is neatly pulled back. He speaks with conviction.

But he also struggles to make ends meet with the limited government assistance he receives to keep him and his teenage daughter sheltered in a local hotel.

"We don't need a handout," the 38-year-old Flint man said. "We need a hand up.

"Most of us aren't lazy, we just need an opportunity."

Burns was one of nearly 100 people who gathered Tuesday at the Genesee County Community Action Resource Department for the forum on Flint area poverty.

Dozens of residents, including Burns, testified about their struggles with local assistance programs, finding jobs and advancing their education before a panel of state-appointed officials.

The panel, made up of representatives from government and nonprofit organizations, was charged with gathering feedback on the issue in six cities throughout Michigan including Detroit, Kalamazoo, Sault Ste. Marie, Big Rapids and Waterford.

The information will be used to craft recommendations for policies and assistance programs that would go before the Legislature and Gov. Jennifer Granholm. It also will be used for a statewide summit on poverty Nov. 13 in Detroit.

"Our goals are not just to put a face on poverty and raise awareness " but to create a foundation for change," said Sonia Harb, chairwoman of the Commission on Community Action and Economic Opportunity, which organized the forum.

Attendees applauded testimonies about less-than-sympathetic social workers and barriers to completing academic degrees while balancing work and family responsibilities - common themes in many of their lives.

"You just throw your hands up and go with the flow and try to squeeze your life in," said Veronia Williams, a 31-year-old mother of six who's been struggling to support her family after injuries she suffered in a fire took her out of the work force. "It's not easy by any stretch of the imagination."

Some dabbed their eyes while listening as others told the panel about their personal struggles and tried to keep their voices from quavering.

"I want something out of life," Williams said. "I want to do better. It's a struggle, and I'm frustrated."

QUICK TAKE

Where to get help

For more information on Genesee County Community Action Resource Department programs for low-income families, call (810) 232-2185.

For information on the Commission on Community Action and Economic Opportunity, call the Michigan Department of Human Services at (517) 373-7394.

Many said they hoped their voices would be heard by state officials.

"You can't sit back and put everyone in the same category because everyone's situation is different," said Joseph Villalpando, 36, of Burton. "We need help, and we need our leaders to start changes."

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Officials cite changing face of those now living in poverty

Andrew Sawmiller



[February 20, 2008](#) - As tales of economies across the country begin to beat to a similar drum as that in Michigan, some of the latest information available on the area's poverty statistics indicate a growing number of those in need in even the most well-off communities in Oakland County and the lakes area. It's no secret times are changing in Michigan for many families and individuals struggling to make ends meet, but as some state and local officials indicate — as well as some federally derived numbers — assistance needs and those who need assistance are also changing.

According to the latest U.S. Census data available for individual communities, which comes from the 2000 census, the lakes area municipalities had the following poverty rates:

White Lake Township had just over 3 percent of the population living in poverty; Milford Township had 5.3 percent living in poverty; Commerce Township had a 3.4 percent poverty level; Wolverine Lake had 2.7 percent living in poverty; Walled Lake recorded a 5 percent poverty rate; Orchard Lake had less than 1 percent of the population living in poverty at half a percentage point; 5.4 percent of Wixom residents were living in poverty; Highland Township had a 5.8 percent poverty rate; Milford Village had 7.2 percent of its population living in poverty; West Bloomfield Township had a 2.7 percent poverty rate; and Waterford Township had 5.1 percent living in poverty.

The U.S. Census Bureau uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is living in poverty. If a family's total income is less than the family's threshold, then that family and every individual in it is considered living in poverty. The official poverty thresholds don't vary geographically, but are updated for inflation using Consumer Price Index. The official poverty definition uses money income before taxes and doesn't include capital gains or non-cash benefits (such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps).

While poverty rates have changed since 2000, given the current status of the state's rocky economy and job market, statistics on local poverty rates are hard to come by.

"The county doesn't do poverty estimates," said Katherine Graham of the county's Planning and Economic Development Services Division. "That's a number that's derived through the county. We're not authorized to do that."

However, according to Graham, the U.S. Census Bureau is in the middle of a project intended to generate and release updated local poverty estimates and figures in the upcoming years.

That effort is known as the Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) program, which is aimed at providing updated information for states, counties, school districts, and eventually individual communities.

"In 2010, there will be no long-form census. So they have been releasing information every year as this (new) program comes on board," Graham said. "Right now, you can get the yearly estimates for communities that are over the population threshold of 65,000. For those, there may be an estimate for as early as 2006."

In the lakes area, that's the case for two communities — West Bloomfield and Waterford townships.

According to the SAIPE and the American Community Survey information available at the Census Bureau's website, the most recent poverty information available (2006) lists West Bloomfield Township as having a poverty rate of almost 5 percent.

Likewise, the poverty rate for all individuals in Waterford Township is listed at just over 7 percent.

The county's poverty rate as a whole was just over 8 percent for 2006, according to the SAIPE report.

The 2006 poverty rate estimates for West Bloomfield and Waterford represent sizable increases in poverty rates compared to 2000 figures.

Numbers from the state programs providing services to those in need tell a similar story.

"In Oakland County in particular, you've got an awful lot of people who are turning to agencies for the first time," said Sharon Parks, vice president of the Michigan League of Human Services. "You have a lot of folks who have been white-collar who are coming to agencies and I think in that area, you have a lot of the auto industry relocation (with that).

"What the economist are saying about the state in general is that we really aren't going to pull out of this thing until sometime later into 2009," she said.

Information from the Michigan Department of Human Services, which administers state and federal assistance to Michigan citizens who qualify, also indicates spikes in state assistance granted to Oakland County residents.

Five assistance programs the department administers are the Family Independence Program (FIP); State Disability Assistance; State Emergency Relief; energy assistance, which includes State Emergency Relief and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance programs; and the Food Assistance program.

The FIP is intended to provide monetary assistance to families with children and pregnant women, to help them pay for living expenses such as rent, utilities, heating, clothing, food and personal care items.

In order to qualify for the program, the children in the household must be under 18-years-old. Households with children who are 18-years-old or 19-years-old may also qualify, assuming the teenager is attending high school on a full-time basis and is expected to graduate before reaching the age of 20.

Additionally, a person without a child in the home — such as a pregnant woman, or parents whose child is in foster care and expected to return home within one year — can be eligible.

According to the state's latest installment report on assistance figures, dated December 2007, the total number of Oakland County recipients was 68,735 receiving a total of about \$8.4 million, or an average of \$122 per recipient. That represents a nearly 6 percent jump from in total services compared to a year ago.

"Food assistance case loads are really going up, and are going up everywhere," Parks said. "You've got people who are in poverty and people who are living at near poor. Those people are struggling just like the folks in poverty. Those trends aren't showing any signs of going down."

An even greater increase in assistance between July 2005 and July 2006 was documented. There was a 12.6-percent increase from July 2005, when there were 54,199 unduplicated recipients in Oakland County, to July 2006, when there were 61,046. Also, the total amount provided to Oakland County residents increased by nearly 19 percent, from \$6.26 million in July 2005 to nearly \$7.44 million in July 2006.

There was a 7.7-percent increase in total unduplicated recipients in Oakland County between 2004, when there were 50,301 recipients, and 2005, when there were 54,199 recipients, according to state data. Total assistance in Oakland County, however, increased by more than 15 percent, from \$5.42 million in July 2004 to \$6.26 million in July 2005.

Between July 2003 and July 2004, there was a slightly smaller increase in total recipients in Oakland County, and in the amount issued to those people. In July 2004, there were 50,301 county recipients of assistance from the five programs, which is about an 11.5 percent increase from July 2003. There was a total of about \$5.42 million in assistance doled out by the state in Oakland County in July 2004, at an average of \$107.74 per recipient.

Between July 2002 and July 2003, the total unduplicated recipients of the five assistance programs increased by 6,295 in Oakland County, equating to a 16.2 percent increase. The July 2002 figure increased to 45,117 (up 16.2 percent) in July 2003, when there was \$4.89 million in assistance provided to Oakland County residents, averaging about \$108 per recipient.

In July 2002, there were 38,822 unduplicated recipients, receiving a total of about \$3.94 million in total assistance — about \$101 per recipient.

The Michigan League of Human Services also recently released its own report entitled "The Changing Face of Poverty in Michigan: More Families Slide into Troubled Times," in which the league states the 2006 U.S. poverty rate was just over 12 percent as compared to Michigan's poverty rate at that time, which was 13 percent or nearly 1.3 million people out of 9.95 million people, the state's population. The same report stated Michigan ranked 20th out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia in poverty rates in 2006.

The changing face, according to Parks, represents a vast number of middle to high-income families and individuals literally slipping under the poverty line over time as jobs leave the state at a time when the dollar can't be stretched as far as it once could.

"It's a fact that the people who have not been poor before are sliding into poverty and it's not one of these things where it just happens quickly," Parks said. "It's kind of this gradual slide where you lose your job, your employment insurance runs out, it's awhile before you find another job and that job doesn't pay very much. Maybe you don't keep that job and pretty soon you find yourself needing to turn to food assistance programs or other programs like cash assistance.

"It's becoming a series of things that sort of happen as a family or individual income is diminished, where you have trouble paying the heat bill," Parks said. "That has become a lot of what we're seeing. People who have good paying jobs are taking lesser paying jobs. So, what we're saying in terms of the changing face of poverty is that we're seeing a lot more people who haven't come to these programs before."

Also, the Michigan Department of Human Services has maintained the Michigan Commission on Community Action and Economic Opportunity with the specific task of holding numerous forums across the state, including in Oakland County, to hear from and discuss poverty issues with those who are currently living below or near the poverty line. These February meetings are part of an effort to hold the state's first ever poverty summit in November.

For forum pointman and commission member Dan Piepszowski, this effort indicates a very real and growing poverty trend that many may not understand.

"We were in Waterford and we took testimony from low-income individuals from Oakland County and (surrounding areas)," he said.

"For places like Oakland County, they're really in between this dynamic, because they're really not part of this sort of generational and long-term urban poverty. Communities in Oakland County have not really suffered from patterns of disinvestment over the years. So it's much more individual situations, loss of jobs, or long-term illness. With the loss of income, there aren't necessarily the supports out there to maintain stability."

Much like Parks and others, Piepszowski said the problem — other than the actual hardships of poverty — is understanding poverty beyond numbers and statistics.

"We have to start looking at poverty in a slightly different scenario," he said. "Poverty can't be characterized

by any one class or race of people. It's happening to a number of people across a broad range and I think we need to move out of stereotypes of who is poor in the state of Michigan."

Andrew Sawmiller is a staff writer for the Spinal Column Newsweekly

WMU program aims to help ex-foster kids

Support spans more than money

BY ROBIN ERB • FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER •

FEBRUARY 21, 2008

From her years in foster care, Anna Dexter-Cheeks settled on a simple life philosophy: "I just make sure I am taking care of myself."

She took that attitude with her to Western Michigan University, but a snow squall and an icy patch led to a crash that totaled her car. Without it, she was cut off from class, child care and work.

And as one of the approximately 500 youths who age out of Michigan's foster care system each year without being adopted, she couldn't call Mom or Dad for help or advice.

If she returns to WMU in the fall, she could be among the first students to benefit from a new program intended to give former foster youths the kind of help she needed. It is unique in Michigan, and some national experts say there may be only one comparable program in the nation.

It starts with free tuition for students leaving the foster care system without being adopted -- but adds support and counseling while requiring them to live on campus and be a kind of family for one another.

"There are no parents with the pep talk, or the parent with the emergency money," said Karen Hanley, head of permanency services for the Michigan Department of Human Services. "It's not even necessarily the big things that they call about, but sometimes it's, 'Where do I go to find a doctor?' 'How do I deal with insurance?' "

The scholarship alone is a relief, allowing such students to use other grants, scholarships or loans to pay for expenses such as room and board and books, said Mark Delorey, head of WMU's financial aid.

Scholarship recipients this fall would also be housed near one another and would be encouraged to tap into a mentoring program with other college students who were foster kids. And they'll be required to do work-study with a mentor.

It's about building relationships, said John Seita, a Michigan State University professor and WMU alum helping set up the program. Now 52, he's also a former foster kid who was shuttled between foster homes.

For years, he said, "I felt like an institutional freak."

He remembers his time at Olivet College. As other kids left for home during the first spring break, Seita went to the dean of students.

"I have nowhere to go," he said.

"Sorry, we're closing the dorms," he was told.

Seita spent the next few weeks sneaking through windows of his empty dormitory and stealing food.

Foster youth may feel desperately alone, and years of turmoil and helplessness hardwire them as mistrusting, Seita said.

"A kid comes to campus and doesn't know the financial aid form or even how to get one. They don't know how to buy books or what to do if they're \$50 short," Seita said. "But they don't want to admit they don't know something. They see that as a sign of weakness."

Getting through obstacles

About 500 young people leave Michigan's foster care system each year. Studies show that 70% say they want to go college, but only about 20%

enroll. And just a quarter of those students will ever complete a degree, according to the Michigan DHS.

Dexter-Cheeks, 21, was lucky. Delorey and associate professor Yvonne Unrau were looking for advice on setting up the scholarship program and found her name on financial aid forms. She had indicated she'd been a ward of the state.

They contacted her right after her car had skidded into a rock wall Dec. 28. Her grades had lunched. Without a paycheck, she was evicted.

Delorey mined for financial aid for Dexter-Cheeks. Unrau took her to a bus station, where Dexter-Cheeks learned bus rides were free with her WMU student ID.

"I was paying \$1.35 every time I got on the bus," she said.

They found medical insurance for Dexter-Cheeks' 4-year-old daughter, a new apartment and money for groceries.

"They became my family," she said.

These days, Dexter-Cheeks takes a bus to classes at nearby Kalamazoo Valley Community College so she can transfer back to WMU and finish her degree. Her goal is to become a social worker for foster children.

"I want them to know there's a light at the end of the tunnel," she said.

Jamie Crandell, a student who, along with Dexter-Cheeks and other former foster youths, is helping design the program at WMU, said she's fortunate. Her foster family was "wonderful."

But there have been bumps. When she was a student at Michigan State University, she had assumed complicated financial aid forms she completed meant her bills were covered.

Three weeks into her courses, however, she got a call from the financial aid office. Someone pushed a paper in front of her and a pen. Something about bills. Something about a loan. She's still not sure it was the best option for her.

"I just knew if I didn't sign it I'd have to drop out of classes," said Crandell, 26, who is now a WMU student.

Representatives of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative said the only comparable program in the country appears to be Guardian Scholars, which started in California.

Reaching out for a connection

Sometimes, though, the challenges of staying in school are about things much less tangible than funds, food and student IDs. The needs can be more about human connections, Hanley said.

It's something Peter Ruei didn't have after a relief organization brought him to Michigan after war in Sudan tore his family apart. He was brought to the Grand Rapids area, despite having no relatives there, and ended up as a teen in the foster care system, behind in basic classes and facing a language barrier.

Now the 21-year-old WMU aviation major is also working 26 hours a week at a local Wal-Mart to cover the costs of flying time. And like Dexter-Cheeks, there is no one else to pick up the bills for parking, class fees or phone bills.

With everything going on, he said, laughing, "It took me three times to become a sophomore."

Such stories don't surprise Amy Smitter, executive director of the Michigan Campus Compact, an association of Michigan colleges and universities. Last year, it partnered with Michigan DHS to host conferences to explore the needs of former foster children in higher education.

"Some of their stories are heartbreaking," Smitter said. "And it's always that one person who made a difference, the person who said, 'Why aren't you going to class?' or ... found out they didn't have food."

Contact **ROBIN ERB** at 313-222-2708 or *rerb@freepress.com*.



Mother of infant faces charges

Thursday, February 21, 2008

THE SAGINAW NEWS

MOUNT PLEASANT -- Police jailed a Mount Pleasant mother on kidnapping charges after she failed to turn over her infant son to the state.

Isabella County Circuit Court authorities on Feb. 13 ordered the woman to surrender her 10-day-old son to the custody of the state Department of Human Resources, state police from the Mount Pleasant Post said.

She didn't. Investigators started looking for her when she failed to appear for a hearing on the matter.

Investigators circulated information about the woman, a male companion and the vehicle they were driving, a 1989 Mercury Marquis.

As a result of the investigation and subsequent media coverage, a citizen spotted the suspect's vehicle in Osceola County. Troopers said the tipster pointed out a trail that the vehicle had taken in a heavily wooded area.

State police from the Reed City and Mount Pleasant posts found the Mercury near a cabin, officers said, where they found the infant and the suspects.

Police turned the baby over to the Department of Human Services and arrested the woman. She remains jailed in Isabella County on outstanding warrants for an unrelated matter, police said.

Her companion is free pending the prosecutor's review of police reports regarding the man's involvement, police said. v

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Todoroff charges dismissed

Thursday, February 21, 2008

By Danielle Quisenberry

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Charges have been dismissed in the case against a local restaurant owner accused of making false reports to Children's Protective Services about the families of former employees.

"We didn't feel like we would be able to sustain a case in court," Jackson County Prosecutor Hank Zavislak said Wednesday. "The proofs weren't sufficient to substantially secure a conviction."

The prosecutor's office in October charged Kurt Todoroff with two felonies: making a false report of a felony and falsely reporting child abuse.

Todoroff, who owns the now-closed Todoroff's Original Coney Island in Blackman Township, was accused of making phony complaints of drug use and sexual assault in order to get back at parents of employees who confronted him about withheld paychecks.

Jackson County District Judge R. Darryl Mazur decided Nov. 15 after a preliminary examination that Todoroff, 51, should stand trial on the charges. He bound the case over to Circuit Court, where a trial was scheduled for Wednesday. But the prosecutor's office dropped the charges Jan. 31.

Zavislak said prosecutors reviewed the evidence after the preliminary exam and decided it wasn't sufficient to prove the case beyond a reasonable doubt.

"At the exam stage, we showed a crime was committed and there was reasonable cause to believe he did it. That is a far cry from proof beyond a reasonable doubt," the prosecutor said.

Todoroff, when approached Wednesday night at his home in Summit Township, declined to comment. A woman who answered the phone at the Birmingham office of his lawyer, Neil Fink, said Fink would not comment.

Todd Mills of Jackson testified at the exam that Todoroff threatened to report to Children's Protective Services that Mills smoked marijuana with his son Tyler, 18, a former Todoroff's employee. Todoroff did this because Tyler would not pay for a damaged uniform shirt, Mills testified.

Todoroff was withholding Tyler's paycheck until he received payment for the shirt.

Todoroff was convicted in July of two misdemeanors for failing to pay wages in a timely fashion. He could have served time in jail, but Mazur, impressed by positive letters and support from Todoroff's family and friends and retired Circuit Judge Charles Nelson, sentenced him to 40 hours of community service.

Todoroff also threatened to make allegations against a 19-year-old former employee and his family, according to exam testimony. Soon after, Children's Protective Services fielded a complaint that Morgan Freed, 19, was sexually assaulting his sister, who is now 15, a former Protective Services employee, Amy Jackson, testified in November.

Protective Services investigated both the drug and assault claims. One was made anonymously by phone and the other, the assault, was reported by the 15-year-old's middle school teacher, who got an anonymous tip from a woman and reported it to the child-welfare agency.

Neither report was found to be substantiated, according to testimony.

The whole ordeal was ``unsettling" for the family of the 19-year-old, said John Heavey, the 15-year-old girl's father.

He said he was not pleased the charges were dropped. ``It was disappointing they weren't able to take it further, but that is the way it goes," he said.

Rhonda Pickrell, Tyler Mills' mother, said the dismissal would have angered her more if Todoroff's business hadn't closed.

Last month, a closed notice was posted on the door of the restaurant at 1200 W. Parnall Road.

``Our biggest thing in doing this was to stop him from doing this to other kids, other people," Pickrell said.

Tyler Mills, who now works two jobs and goes to college, said he was both relieved, because he no longer has to appear in court, and disappointed in the outcome.

``I would have liked to have seen him at least go to jail or something," he said.

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The Daily Telegram

[Print Page](#)**THURSDAY FEBRUARY 21, 2008** Last modified: *Wednesday, February 20, 2008 9:25 AM EST*

Parents learn tips to stop bullying

Parents who attended a workshop Tuesday learned a variety of ways to help stop bullying.

By [David Panian](#)

Daily Telegram Staff Writer

ADRIAN — Parents learned at a workshop Tuesday a variety of easy ways to help stop bullying.

Comparing bullying to domestic violence, psychologist Marcia McEvoy of Grand Rapids told a small audience at the Adrian High School theater that bullying can lead to learning difficulties, appetite and sleep disturbances, depression and suicidal or homicidal feelings in children. The effects of bullying can even last into adulthood, with adults being much more likely to be depressed or have low self-esteem and men having trouble committing to long-term relationships because they have trouble trusting others.

Meanwhile, McEvoy said, bullies can also have troubles later in life, such as boys having criminal records and girls needing mental health treatment.

“This is not benign behavior,” she said. “This has long- and short-term consequences.”

To address bullying, McEvoy has been working this week and last with Adrian schools students and staff on ways to stop bullying. Tuesday’s workshop was a part of that process.

“If we didn’t feel this was an issue, we wouldn’t have Mrs. McEvoy here,” Adrian Superintendent Del Cochran said.

Michelle Vanderhorst, whose daughter is an Adrian fifth-grader, said she hopes the program being implemented helps her daughter. She said she has tried to get help from the schools, but it hasn’t stopped the group of “popular” girls from picking on her daughter.

“I am so excited about this,” she said after the workshop. “My daughter has been bullied everyday since kindergarten to the point where she is physically sick about going to school.”

Cochran spoke with Vanderhorst afterwards about what can be done to help her daughter.

McEvoy said traditional advice given to the targets of bullying — “suck it up,” “don’t let them get to you” — doesn’t work.

She said that advice would be considered ridiculous if given to a domestic violence victim.

“The dynamics of domestic violence and the dynamics of bullying are almost identical,” she said.



Consultant Marcia McEvoy, left, presents anti-bullying tips at a workshop Tuesday at Adrian High School with Adrian High freshman Brandi Bedolla and junior Ryan Huddleston. — Telegram photo by [David Panian](#)

Bullying involves repeated, intentional attacks between two people of unequal power, McEvoy said. Students usually define those who have money, athletic skills, good looks or outgoing personalities as having power.

The faculties at both Adrian middle schools are working on a chart that will define various kinds of aggressive behavior — from rumor-mongering and backstabbing to physical violence — and list the consequences the staff will follow in meting out punishment, with escalating penalties for repeat offenders. McEvoy is also working with the students so they know what to expect when those consequences are put in place.

Children don't necessarily see bullying actions as violence, McEvoy said. When she meets with them, they tell her violence involves using weapons such as guns and knives.

"I try to broaden their view of what violence can be," she said.

Among children, looks and gestures can be forms of violence, McEvoy said, mimicking ways that girls can shun other girls. She said after the workshop that girls tend to bully other girls, sometimes even those in their circle of friends. Boys, however, tend to bully boys and girls outside their group of friends.

Teachers and other adults need to "sweat the small stuff" and be aware of the early signs of bullying. When they see something, such as a girl being rude to another by shutting her out of a group discussion, they should use a "15-second intervention" with the offending student. They should describe what they saw, remind the student of the definition of aggressive behavior, tell them they would never let someone disrespect the student like that and tell them the behavior is unacceptable and needs to stop.

With that and the consequences chart, there can be a 50 percent to 80 percent reduction in bullying, McEvoy said. She reminded parents and staff that the consequences have to be applied equally to all students.

The trick can be having the adults recognize bullying in the first place. McEvoy said researchers at Wellesley College found 71 percent of bullying happens right in front of adults who see it as "kids being kids" or don't want to "raise a generation of wimps."

Students also play a role in stopping bullying, McEvoy said. Bystanders can stop bullying within 10 seconds of sticking up for the target of a bully. She said if kids aren't taught how to react, only 11 percent will intervene if they see someone else being picked on.

Adrian students are being told it's OK to report to an adult if they see someone bullying someone else, McEvoy said. They can send a teacher an e-mail or leave a voice message or give a note to the school secretary to be passed along so that the bully will be called to meet with the person at the school who is in charge of discipline.

She said she tells students, "If (the student being bullied) won't stand up because they're too intimidated, you need to report it."

McEvoy said the adults need to find out the "five Ws" of the incident: who, what, where when and witnesses.

Attendees were given information on how to identify bullying behavior in their children, how to tell if their children are being bullied and tips on how to stop bullying.

-- CLOSE WINDOW--

Grand Blanc school's letter about accused sex offender prompts debate: Were his rights violated?

by Sally York and Bryn Mickle | The Flint Journal

Wednesday February 20, 2008, 7:46 PM

GRAND BLANC, MI -- Did a letter sent home by Indian Hill Elementary's principal, warning parents that an accused sex offender lives next to the school, erode the man's presumption of innocence?

Some say no. They believe the school had a responsibility to protect its students, and note that the letter did not identify the defendant's name or address.

"I think parents deserve to know," said Julie Nielson, mother of three children in the Grand Blanc School District. "These are little kids in an elementary school. I don't think any civil rights have been violated."

But an attorney with Human Rights Watch in New York believes the district went too far and may have exposed a man who hasn't been convicted of a crime to harassment.

"It's hard for me to know how (the district) protected kids in this case," said HRW senior counsel Jamie Fellner.

Although news media have printed the man's name, Fellner said the district took it a step further by publicizing information about where the man lives.

"I don't think it's the school district's place," said Fellner. "I find it very troubling."

Journal online reader "andi03" questioned whether the accused man's legal rights were compromised, posting this message on The Journal's blog after an article about the letter ran last week:

"Yes, I would want to know if a sexual offender was living in my neighborhood, but at what cost? The school system maligning the reputation of (a) man that was just arrested and not adjudicated? Dunno...rock...hard place."

The man, Michael B. Huston, 44, of Grand Blanc was arraigned last Sunday on one count of soliciting a minor for immoral purposes. His preliminary examination, which will determine whether the case will go to trial, was moved from Tuesday to March 11.

Police said Huston sent a 15-year-old boy from Washtenaw County sexually explicit emails and text messages for months. When Huston proposed a meeting, the boy got scared and notified authorities.

Huston served six years in prison, from 1994-2000, for aggravated stalking, according to the Michigan Department of Corrections Web site. His name does not appear on the state or national sex offender registry.

"If the district knows information that is credible, they have a responsibility to let parents know," said Michael T. Joliat, a criminal defense attorney in Flint. "If (Huston) was charged, that's public record."

Grand Blanc school officials learned about Huston on The Ann Arbor News' Web site, said Mary Nerreter, the district's communications director. Indian Hill principal Sarah Stone mailed a letter to parents last Wednesday describing the charge against him.

The letter continued: "Although the case has no relationship to Grand Blanc Schools, we wanted you to be aware of the situation Your child's safety is our number one goal."

A week later, Nerreter stands by the district's decision to send the letter.

"In hindsight, I think we'd do it exactly the same way again. As a parent, I would want this information," she said.

"By not releasing his name, we've eliminated the argument that we tried the case in this letter. We certainly did not, in my mind."

William Buhl of Paw Paw, a former judge in Van Buren County's 36th Judicial Circuit and an advocate of sex offenders' rights, advised Grand Blanc to tread cautiously.

He said school officials were correct not to identify Huston by name or reveal his address, but that certain details in the letter -- including the newspaper that named Huston -- made it easy for recipients find out his name through a simple Google search.

"I wouldn't put that information in there, with computer searches these days," Buhl said. "I would err on the side of caution."

He said the "real hysteria" about sex offenders in today's society is fueled by premature dissemination of information.

"It's very difficult for us in the criminal justice system, especially when the information comes from a source of authority, like a school district or principal," he said.

"People just don't understand the concept of innocent until proven guilty.

There are some vigilante-types of people out there who take things into their own hands."

Lisa Hawtin of Burton, whose daughter attends Indian Hill, said she supports the district's actions. She speculated about the response if no letter had been spent.

"There would have been a lot of upset parents," Hawtin said.



THE BAY CITY TIMES

Officials look for ways to market and fill Juvenile Home

Thursday, February 21, 2008

By **Ryan J. Stanton**

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A decade since the Bay County Juvenile Home underwent major renovations, expecting a boom in business, occupancy remains low.

"I don't think it's any huge secret that we have 29 beds here and they're not all getting utilized," said Director Juliann R. Bollman.

Bay County officials are beginning to take steps to better market the detention facility in Hampton Township - and keep the cost of housing youth offenders competitive with rates in surrounding counties.

"We do have a plan," said Bollman, speaking before county commissioners this week.

After hearing from Bollman, commissioners on the Personnel/Judicial Committee voted unanimously on Tuesday to lower the daily rates for lodging out-of-county youths from \$170.25 to \$150. They also agreed to eliminate a \$69 physical fee for out-of-county residents, a fee charged by only one other county in Michigan.

County officials hope that will put the county on a more level playing field with detention centers in direct competition to attract juvenile detainees as a source of revenue.

Bollman said juvenile centers in Saginaw and Midland counties both charge \$150 a day. That's known as a "per diem" fee that other counties pay for housing their youth offenders outside of their jurisdictions.

"Not every county has a juvenile home - a lot of the northern counties don't, and if they do, they're very small," Bollman said. "We have more beds than we need: Why not make them available to other counties?"

Bay County currently reserves 11 beds for in-county youths and six beds for out-of-county youths. Officials say it has been a struggle to keep those beds filled on a consistent basis.

According to Bollman, on any given day in 2007, there were an average of just under 10 local youths; and just under four out-of-county youths. In all, more than 400 juveniles passed through the doors last year.

Those numbers have gone down in recent years, Bollman acknowledges, adding that business was "booming" until about 2001, at which point "it started to drop off."

Renovations to the Juvenile Home a decade ago included the addition of a 12-bed north wing. The idea was that Bay County would accept more juvenile offenders from other counties, and bring in more revenue. After some success, Saginaw County expanded its juvenile facility, and Midland County built its own.

With demand shrinking, Bay County decided to close its new north wing, only to later use it for a youth substance abuse program. County officials, however, shut down that program in August 2006 after losing money on it.

Officials now say there are talks of using the vacant north wing as a weekend detention center for juveniles who are in school on weekdays; but that's just one option.

Bollman said she intends to launch a marketing campaign that includes more outreach, development of a new Web site, and a survey of other counties to find out their needs.

"We're trying to increase the utilization of the current 17 beds we use, and then find a need for the extra 12 beds in the north pod," she said. "I really think there has to be a niche out there where we can serve a need in the state."

Marge Marchlewicz, Probate Court administrator, said while occupancy rates may be shrinking at the Juvenile Home, juvenile crime in Bay County is not going down.

"I can clearly say, for the last four years, we've basically stayed the same in terms of the number of petitions," she said.

A petition represents a complaint filed in the Juvenile Division of Circuit Court. In some cases, one petition may include multiple criminal charges related to a single youth offender.

Petitions hit an all-time low of 661 just before spiking at 1,000 in 2004, tapering off only slightly in the last few years: 923 in 2005; 871 in 2006; and 932 in 2007.

Both changes acted on Tuesday must receive final approval at the next meeting of the Bay County Board of Commissioners, scheduled for 9 a.m. March 11 at the County Building.

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Man charged in domestic incident

FROM STAFF REPORTS

TRAVERSE CITY -- A man is charged with interfering with electronic communications after he allegedly took a woman's phone as she tried to call police.

Willie Kirksey, 47, is charged with interfering with electronic communications, a two-year felony, and domestic violence, a 93-day misdemeanor. A woman who lives with Kirksey in Garfield Township said he allegedly punched her several times and took her phone from her as she tried to call police, court records show.

Kirksey faces a Feb. 29 preliminary examination.

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U.P. seniors have new information hotline

By KRISTEN KOHRT, Journal Staff Writer

POSTED: February 21, 2008

MARQUETTE — A new service from the Upper Peninsula Area Agency on Aging provides a number for seniors to call to get information on long-term care services available in the U.P.

Seniors can now dial 2-1-1 to get information on home care, nursing facilities and assistive devices 24 hours a day in the U.P.

The new service was one of several senior services issues discussed at the Marquette County Board's regular meeting Tuesday night, when the board heard updates from the county's Aging Advisory Committee.

Aging Advisory Committee representative Bruce Heikkila said it is important for seniors "to know where to go if they need long term care. There are many different services available in Marquette County."

Heikkila also informed the board of a survey that the advisory committee plans to distribute to seniors in the county in order to get a better idea of how services can improve and what new services are wanted or needed. Heikkala said it is important to understand and meet the long term needs of a growing senior population.

"By 2020, it's projected that 18 percent of the population in the U.P. will be over 65," he said. "It's important to see what their needs are and to help the many seniors who live on fixed incomes."

In addition, Heikkila suggested that seniors be given more information on the future tax rebate the

federal government plans to give. He said since many seniors do not file tax returns, they may not receive the rebate, which is up to \$600 for singles and \$1,200 for couples.

Heikkila said it would be worth it for seniors to file a tax return even if they didn't have to in order to receive the rebate, which is only available to those who file.

"You hate to see people who can get an extra \$600 not get it," he said.

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Michigan Report

February 20, 2008

TWICE MONTHLY FOOD STAMP PAYMENTS APPROVED BY HOUSE PANEL

A bill that proponents say would help food stamp recipients get access to healthier, fresher food by issuing food assistance payments twice a month instead of at the beginning of the month was reported by the House Families and Children's Services Committee on Wednesday (See [Gongwer Michigan Report, October 24, 2007](#)).

Sponsor of [HB 4923](#), Rep. Andy Meisner (D-Ferndale), said that the current system used by the Department of Human Services that gets food assistance payments to recipients throughout the first ten days of the month often results in a shortage of fresh foods at grocery stores at the end of the month and many times forces stores to rush to fill demand for food at the beginning of the month, only to have excess at the end of the month.

He said his bill is aimed at increasing the availability of healthy foods and also at evening out the demand for grocers and wholesalers.

However, Ron Hicks, legislative liaison for DHS, said that the department's suggestion to spread out payments over 19 days a month would probably cost about as much as Mr. Meisner's fix, would allow recipients to retain their self-sufficiency, and would likely equally address the supply and demand problem faced by grocers.

DHS is neutral on the bill, Mr. Hicks said, but still questions whether it would benefit users and is awaiting input from the federal government, which is important because the U.S. Department of Agriculture funds much of the food stamp program and would cover a portion of the costs of switching to twice monthly payments, should the bill become law.

The department has estimated that extending payments over 19 days or switching to twice monthly payments would each cost about \$600,000 in administrative costs, an amount already accounted for in this year's budget.

[Rep. Brian Palmer](#) (R-Romeo) voted against the legislation, saying he doesn't agree with spending "even \$1,000 of taxpayers' money to reward the lack of good budgeting behavior on the part of people on assistance."

He said he'd rather encourage people to save their money and budget it to last throughout the month and put the \$600,000 back into the food stamp program.

Mr. Meisner said that his bill isn't a comment on people's budgeting behavior; "it's about facilitating access to fresh foods."

Chair [Rep. Brenda Clack](#) (D-Flint) said that people often buy several items at once because they don't have transportation to visit the store several times a month. She reiterated also that if they know that there isn't likely to be fresh food available at the end of the month, they will likely to stock up at the beginning of the month.

Deer kill provided food to hundreds of families

Posted by [Jackson Citizen Patriot](#) February 21, 2008 08:03AM

JACKSON — I do not want to get into the pros and cons of the deer kill. I personally think it was for the good for many reasons. On Jan. 26, at Immanuel Lutheran Church's pantry, 275 families were fortunate to receive some of the venison.

I had read complaints in the Voice of the People about the deer kill. It was my thought that the people of Jackson needed to hear something good about it. I passed out paper for our clients to give their thoughts about the venison they had received and were receiving again that day. More than 100 people who came for food filled out 11 two-sided sheets. This meat meant so much to so many people. "Thank you" was repeated over and over.

I wanted someone to know that the Jackson community did those in need a good thing. Meat is not always available at a decent price, and this venison was an answer to prayer.

Our year-end stats show how our pantry has grown in four years. There were 1,589 new clients for 2007, as well as the others who had been there before. That figure added up to 10,742 families served in those 12 months.

Since opening our doors in October 2003, we have served 27,452 families. We serve about 250 to 275 families per week. If you figure four in a family, that is a lot of people in Jackson being fed. Most of those are very thankful now for the venison.

— *Alice B. Wiltse*
pantry coordinator, Immanuel Lutheran Church

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Bills introduced to regulate heat shutoff rules

By KIM HOYUM, Journal Staff Writer

POSTED: February 21, 2008

MARQUETTE — Two Upper Peninsula legislators have introduced bills to require utility companies to adhere to more generous rules when shutting off power or heat to senior and low-income customers.

State Representatives Mike Lahti, D-Hancock, and Steve Lindberg, D-Marquette, are proposing the package of bills. They said in a press release the need for better shutoff protections was highlighted in December when a 90-year-old Kalamazoo-area woman was found dead in her home of exposure, four days after her power had been shut off. The woman's daughter, who was reported to be mentally disabled, also suffered frostbite and exposure.

The bills would keep companies from shutting off seniors' utilities in the winter, and require them to try to ensure that mentally disabled customers do not have their utilities shut off. Companies also would be required to give customers at least 15 days notice before a shutoff, and to notify them in person or by certified mail. If a senior customer has not restored service within three business days, utility companies would be required to visit the home and talk to the person about the situation.

"Losing heat and electricity can mean the difference between life and death in the Upper Peninsula," Lindberg said in the press release. "By requiring utility companies to improve their notification procedures, we will help keep our most vulnerable residents safe and warm in their homes."

Alger-Marquette Community Action Board executive director Earl Hawn said the lengthened period of notice before a shutoff might have the benefit of allowing human services providers like AMCAB to help customers with their bills.

"This bill seems to add some extra protection," he said. "Shutoff protection for our most vulnerable, especially senior citizens and low-income senior citizens, is so important."

He said requests for help with shutoff notices usually do come from low-income individuals, and that group includes seniors who are on fixed Social Security incomes.

Article Photos



LAHTI

AMCAB outreach coordinator Mary Jane Wilson said the action board has helped more people with heat assistance to date this year than it had at the same time in 2007.

"A lot of it is people who have never asked for help before," Wilson said, also noting people are bringing in higher bills with their heat requests, partly due to higher fuel prices.

"We all know how cold winters are in the Upper Peninsula," Lahti said in the press release. "Our heating bills can get pretty expensive, especially for working families and seniors in these tough economic times. This plan will require that utility companies work with our most vulnerable residents to ensure that they aren't left out in the cold."

Hawn said while the action board partners with other human services agencies locally, it is receiving less heat assistance funding than in the past.

"And the demand is at least equal, if not greater," he said.

The bills also would require utilities to waive all fees and fines associated with a shutoff if the company did not abide by the rules on providing proper notice. The company would have to then pay a fine, to go to the State Emergency Relief Fund, which helps residents who can't pay their utility bills. Further, utility companies would be liable for any costs the customer incurred from the shutoff, such as damage from burst pipes, if they had shut the power off without proper notice.

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Fundraiser to help with heating bills

Thursday, February 21, 2008

BY SARA WAISANEN

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KALAMAZOO -- The public is invited to help raise money for Kalamazoo County residents struggling to pay their heating bills by participating in the annual Walk for Warmth fundraiser Saturday.

Participants collect pledges and walk either a 1-mile or 3-mile course through downtown Kalamazoo. The walk starts at 9 a.m. Saturday at the First Baptist Church, 315 W. Michigan Ave. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m.

Organizers encourage people to come out and walk even if they have not collected any pledges, said Wanda Hurt, senior secretary for the Community Action Bureau, which sponsors the event. Hurt said the agency expects about 150 to 200 people to participate.

The goal is to raise \$50,000. Last year, funds raised through Walk for Warmth assisted more than 40 families with their winter heating bills.

Pledges for Walk for Warmth and donations to the heating-assistance program are accepted throughout the year.

People in need of help paying their heating and electric bills can contact the Community Action Bureau, Kalamazoo County Department of Human Services, Salvation Army or a local church, Walk for Warmth Chairwoman Hannah McKinney said.

"Unless we as a community step up our contributions to Walk for Warmth and/or the Salvation Army, many residents in this county will face the winter months without heat and electricity," McKinney, who is Kalamazoo vice mayor, said in a news release.

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